

Domestic Workers

First person testimonies

Elizabeth Wayua Nathaniel, 31, domestic worker



Elizabeth Wayua, 31, a domestic worker, takes a break from her chores in Pipeline, Embakasi, Nairobi, Kenya. 2016

My name is Elizabeth Wayua Nathaniel. I am 31 years old and I live in Mukuru kwa Njenga slum, where I was born and raised. I went to school and even gave birth to my daughter there. I finished primary in 1999 but I didn't continue with my studies after that. I was just at home depending on my parents. My parents catered for both my needs and those of my daughter.

I've been a domestic worker since 2011. I went into domestic work because of the responsibilities I had. I realised that as a parent I should cater for my child's needs. I couldn't overburden my mother with that anymore.

I pay 2500 [Kenyan shillings] per month as rent. Housing is poor as the roofs leak when it rains, toilets are an issue and there are also problems with garbage disposal. You can see the poor state of the roads.

I live with my daughter. She's 13 years old. The school she goes to is not good, because of the environment. The school is in the same area we live in and I'm not completely comfortable with my child learning there. The drainage in particular is quite poor. Also, being a public school there are overcrowded classrooms with a student to teacher ratio of 120:1. Parents can't accurately assess their child's performance as their work is marked by other pupils, due to the inability of the teacher to attend to everyone.

I wake up at 6:30 and make sure I'm at my employer's by 7am so that I can release her to go to work. I then continue with house chores as well as taking care of the baby until around 6:30pm when my employer returns. I then get home at around 7 pm and cook for my daughter, so I get to know how her day went. I also use that time to finish chores I left undone, but I make sure that I'm in bed by 9pm.

At work, the challenge is the late payment of salaries. This is a problem for certain obligations such as paying house rent, school fees and providing for my child. In a month I'm paid 4500 Kenyan shillings (approx \$USD 44). However, I can add to that during the weekend from the casual jobs I do. I could get an additional 500-1000 shillings (\$USD 5-10) if I'm lucky. I use that money to pay rent, school fees and other related expenses as well as house shopping.

The amount I earn is not fair because the kind of work I do could be more than what my employer does. It's just because we have no choice. Circumstances force us to make do. I feel bad knowing that there are other people who are paid more than I am, because I'm the one left in poverty. I feel bad because had we been paid what is required by law then I wouldn't be where I am right now. I'd be really far ahead.

What I think should be done to try and bridge the gap between the rich and the poor is educating people of their rights. Domestic workers like me don't get the pay they merit because they don't know their rights.

NOPE [National Organisation of Peer Educators - Oxfam's national partner] and Oxfam have assisted us by educating us on our rights as domestic workers. They've also informed us on where we can get the necessary support if we encounter any challenges in the workplace. They also encouraged us to form groups and also gave us ideas on starting small businesses on the side to supplement the income received from domestic work.

It has helped because now I know my rights. I know what I can and cannot do in the course of my work. It also taught me that I don't have to solely rely on domestic work as a source of income. In one of the exercises we have taken part in with NOPE and Oxfam, we were informed of a union that was established to represent workers like me. It's called KUDHEIHA (Kenya Union of Domestic, Hotel, Educational Institutions, Hospitals and Allied Workers).

Even if I haven't done anything myself at least I've been able to assist my fellow domestic workers. For example I advised my friend to sell groundnuts as she waits outside to get domestic work to do. I take pride in the fact that I've been able to help others.

I feel good having helped other women, especially the women who would wait outside residential areas to get employed. At times they would end up going the whole day without getting a job. However because of my advice they don't go home hungry as they have an alternative source of income as they don't have to rely on domestic work.

In my opinion, it is difficult for the government to enforce the rule on minimum wage especially on our part as domestic workers. This is because other workers will allow

themselves to be exploited due to desperation to get something to be able to sustain themselves and their families. This will in turn lock out those insisting on the minimum wage because there are others offering cheaper labour. We were told that that minimum wage should be between 10000-12000 shillings (approx \$USD 100-200) but so far I haven't seen any changes.

First of all, it starts with me. It's my responsibility and my right to refuse to be exploited in terms of pay. Secondly, my employer. We need to come to an understanding with our employers. Thirdly, we need a union to represent us as domestic workers and one that will fight for our rights.

Women's groups play a part in the fight to protect our rights. So far their impact has been effective. For example, there was a case in April this year where a woman had been casually employed for domestic work but her employer refused to pay her. So as a group we took up this matter and reported it to the chief's office but he didn't avail himself to assist us. So we took it upon ourselves to solve the matter. What we did was camp outside the man's house until he paid our comrade what was owed to her.

Due to how embarrassing it was, he paid her on the spot so that we move away from her doorstep. This was a big win not just for us as a group but as domestic workers. Other domestic workers now know that desperation shouldn't take them to such a household for employment. We've been able to inform other domestic workers about such employers.

We felt good about ourselves. We felt powerful. This showed that you don't have to wait for someone or a union to fight for your rights. You can just go ahead and do it yourself. You can help yourself if you decide to take action.

There was a time NOPE/Oxfam came to Mukuru and had an exercise involving 700 women who were further divided into groups of 10 that would support each other in forming self help groups. In these groups we have a "merry go round" system of saving where money collected from one's savings within a particular time is given to one member with each member getting their turn (it's a rotating savings system). For example in our group, one woman was able to start a grocery business using the money she received from the "merry go round" while I was able to add to my savings for my daughter's education.

The NOPE/Oxfam training really helped us. We were educated on how to have and maintain good relationships with our employers. When it comes to working hours, it all depends on what is agreed upon with the employer. There shouldn't be a duration of time that is forced on you, it must be based on an understanding between the employer and the employee. That way, my say also counts.

I do get breaks once in a while. When my employer is around she gives me the day off. She also gives me the day off during public holidays. However during the course of my work I do not get breaks as such because I'm mostly occupied by the baby but when he relaxes, so do I.

If I'm sick, it depends on the understanding I have with my employer, but it also depends on the magnitude of the sickness. If it's manageable, then I can persevere and come to work. However if it's too much to handle and I miss coming to work, I will still get paid. It all goes down to your understanding with your employer.

If you find a good employer, then you can get paid really well. If given the opportunity I'd still do domestic work, but set up a business on the side to supplement my wages.

Having such a good relationship has been vital because now we don't face some of the challenges we used to encounter before. This is all because of that good relationship we have with the employer. There were times when working for men, they would demand for sex in addition to finishing chores so as to guarantee payment. Due to the education we received from NOPE/Oxfam, we now know that it is not a must that we perform such acts to guarantee being paid.

Background

An estimated 2.2 million residents of Nairobi work in the informal sector and live in under-served slum settlements. There are huge disparities in empowerment levels between women and men, with women facing challenges such as limited education, lack of employment and risks of physical and sexual violence.

Within Oxfam's target groups, only a quarter of domestic workers are aware of policies and laws which set out their right to decent working standards. Kenya has not yet ratified the International Labour Organisation's Convention 189 that sets the labour standards for domestic work, which means that women are left vulnerable to unregulated wages, working hours and benefits such as lack of sick days. Oxfam is pushing the Ministry of Labour to enforce better regulation of domestic workers' rights.

Oxfam's work

Oxfam's [Wezesha Jamii \(swahili for 'empowering communities'\) project](#) is run in partnership with local national organisations SITE Enterprise Promotion, Youth Alive! Kenya and National Organization for Peer Educators (NOPE) in five informal settlements around Nairobi - Mukuru, Kibera, Korogocho, Mathare and Kawangware.

Over four years, this EU-funded project aims to reach 30,000 women working in the informal economy (10,000 domestic workers and 20,000 small scale traders).

The Wezesha Jamii project aims to help vulnerable people who depend on the informal economy in Nairobi by:

- **Increased livelihood opportunities and social support options of female target groups** by coordinating vocational training, linking the women with financial and training institutions in the public, private and CSO sectors, and setting up information sharing systems
- **Promoting equity and resilience** by linking women to the National Health Insurance Fund (NHIF) and the National Social Security Fund (NSSF),

researching women's care work and advocating for better social service provision

- **Helping women to feel empowered to exert their rights and use their collective voice** by informing women of their rights, and help create women trader's and domestic workers federations
- **Making sure that the Government and other stakeholders are well informed and deliver on their responsibilities more effectively**, by building the capacity of county government officials and others, facilitating dialogue between women and the government for better service provision, and campaigning for the Government, private sector and employers of domestic workers to uphold their obligations to protect women

Oxfam in Kenya is also helping to fight economic inequality through the Domestic Resource Mobilisation (DRM) project. In Nairobi, Oxfam is setting up health facility monitoring committees, and community accountability units (CANs), where community members use scorecards to assess public services and follow up on how public revenue is spent.